

Kimberly Cook: Inventor of the Braille Beeper

Someone sent me an article about Kimberly Cook about two years ago, and I immediately began telling her story in my speeches, over lunch with friends, on the phone, in letters, by e-mail. Finally, I was going to be in New Jersey and would have my chance to meet her. I was excited. As my friend, Naomi, and I were driving to Kimberly's house, we were joking, "How often do you have to wait until after 4:00 p.m. to meet Mitzvah heroes because they first have to get home from elementary school?"

Kimberly is the "kid" who at age nine invented the beeper with Braille numbers on it so that blind people could get their messages whenever it was convenient for them...and have the same privacy as sighted people. The real story was just as the article had stated: she was assigned some science project, and she came up with this idea (which is being patented), and yes, she was only nine when she did it.

I was a little disappointed when I saw her, because at age 11, she was considerably taller than she looked in the picture I had of her from the *Newark Star-Ledger*. I wanted her to be a Little Kid, but she must have been eating all the right foods along with the standard junky stuff. Most certainly she was still a kid. I actually think that part of the time we were there, she was thinking, "When are these old people going to leave, so I can get back to playing with my friends?" Her friends hovered in the background, waiting to return to important 11-year-old matters.

Naomi must have been convincing on the phone when she arranged the meeting. She assured Kimberly's mother that we weren't crackpots or people who wanted to make a million dollars on her kid's reputation.

The encounter was very brief: we came in, spent about a half hour, then left. Kimberly and I swapped autographs. She signed a photocopy of the newspaper article, and I signed and gave her a book, showing her where I had mentioned her name and her breakthrough. (I'll get her signed picture framed, but I'm not sure what she'll do with my book.)

I can't even tell you whether or not she does her homework on time or straightens her room as often and as well as her parents want her to straighten it. I don't even know whether or not she whines or screeches when she is in a bad mood or wants to bug her parents. I don't know if she spends hours on the phone, but she certainly stumbled onto something *very* important, and this, without being blind or her mother or father being blind or anything like that. She just put some very important 2 and 2's together: beepers and blind people, got down to tinkering, consulted other tinkerers and experts, and came up with this beeper with Braille numbers.

That doesn't make her anyone special, even though it makes her special. As I wrote in my other book, *anyone* could have done it, and maybe if we all went to visit her, she could give us a few more ideas about how we can use our minds and hands and talents to do other Big Time things. Better: if we would bring together a bunch of uninhibited 8- and 9- and 10- and 11-year-olds and have them meet her and then give them a long list of what's missing or almost lost forever in this world, maybe they'd go home and come up with a long list of inventions and millions of other people would be that much better off as a result. Millions of people.

I'm sure Kimberly still can't figure out exactly who we were or what it means that I lecture about her at synagogues and Jewish Community Centers and other groups all over North America, but that doesn't matter.

What matters is that she did it and that there's no Great Secret to it. She just did it and anyone else could do it just as she did it. Why not?